

# Five Myths About Young People and Social Media

PT [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201402/five-myths-about-young-people-and-social-media](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201402/five-myths-about-young-people-and-social-media)

**1** Teenagers have always been attracted to public spaces where they can hang out with friends, find new friends, and talk endlessly with peers about matters that concern them, away from parents and other authority figures. Such gatherings are crucial to human development; they are how teenagers expand their social horizons, share views on issues that matter to them, experiment with different versions of their personality, and develop the sense of independence from parents and other adults that they must in order to become adults themselves.

**2** Until rather recently, the places where teens would find one another were physical, geographical spaces, but today they are more often located in cyberspace. Many adults are puzzled, and some are appalled, by the amount of time teens spend online and by what they seem to do there. A terrific new book by danah boyd (who spells her name without capitals), entitled *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, helps us make sense of it.

The book, published this month by Yale University Press, is the product of an extensive program of research. From 2005 to 2012, boyd traveled back and forth across the United States meeting with and talking with teenagers, and also with parents, teachers, librarians, youth ministers, and others who work with teens. She also spent "countless hours" studying teens through the traces they left online, on their social network sites, blogs, and other social media. In addition, she and her collaborator Alice Marwick conducted formal, semi-structured interviews of 166 teens about their social media habits.

As the title of her book (*It's Complicated*) suggests, the results of boyd's study can't be summarized with a few simple statements. The book debunks some of the simplistic myths about teens and technology that we often find in the popular media or hear in conversations among adults. Here are five of those myths, and some of what boyd has to tell us that is relevant to each:

**Myth #1: Technology creates social isolation.**

## Marking text directions:

1. Number paragraphs 1-26
2. Underline author claims.
3. Highlight evidence used to back up claims.
4. Answer the discussion questions at the end.

A teenager at a computer or smartphone may look socially isolated, but, more often than not, the teen is using that device to overcome social isolation—isolation that we adults have imposed. Boyd says that she often heard parents complain that their teens preferred computers to “real people,” but the teens’ perspective was quite different. Teens, throughout the country, and across ethnic groups, told her repeatedly that they would much rather get together with friends in person, but had little opportunity to do so. They communicated with their friends through social media, because that was often the only way they could reach them.

In generations past, teenagers, and even preteens and younger children, socialized with one another as they walked to school and back every day. At school they could socialize during lunch hour and other breaks in the day. After school and on weekends, they could walk, bicycle, take public transit, or (in the case of older teens) drive to find one another at parks, fields, street corners, vacant lots, secret clubhouses, diners, malls, or other regular meeting places. Today’s teens don’t have such freedom. Many aren’t allowed to walk to school. “Lunch hour” is no longer even close to an hour, and other breaks in the school day have been largely removed. Many parents restrict their teens from venturing out without an adult, and even when parents do allow it, other forces work against it. As boyd points out, policy makers have implemented curfews and anti-loitering laws aimed at teens, in the mistaken belief that this curbs juvenile crime (she cites evidence that it does not); and many commercial venues that once welcomed or at least tolerated teens now ban them, especially when they appear in groups. Even when an individual teen is free to leave the house and has a place to go, the chance that his or her friends will also have that freedom is small.

Boyd found that the parents she talked with often believed they were providing their teens with opportunities to socialize when they enrolled them in and drove them to adult-directed after-school activities, but the teens disagreed. They told boyd that these activities provided little opportunity for the kind of socializing they craved, precisely because of the adult structure and continuous adult surveillance.

As boyd (p 106-107) puts it, *“Authority figures simultaneously view teens as nuisances who must be managed and innocent children who must be protected. Teens are both public menaces and vulnerable targets. Society is afraid of them and for them.”* Because of this, we have more or less banned teens from physical public places; so, being humans and needing social networks, they have figured out how to get together online.

### **Myth #2: Teens are addicted to technology and social media.**

In a previous essay on this blog ([on video game “addiction”](#)), I described our tendency to apply the term addiction to almost any kind of activity that people enjoy and engage in frequently. Used more conservatively and usefully, the term refers to an activity that (a) is compulsive in the sense that the person hasn’t been able to stop doing it, even with great effort, and (b) is clearly more harmful than helpful to the person engaged in that behavior.

Boyd found that some teens indeed do spend more time with social media than they say they would like. They acknowledged being drawn into it and enjoying it so much that they lose track of time, and said it does cause some harm by subtracting from the time they can spend on other activities, including those that adults are encouraging them to do, such as schoolwork. But it is not clear that the harm outweighs the gains. And, even if it does, boyd suggests, the language of addiction is not helpful here. It sensationalizes the problem. It implies pathology rather than a time management problem of the sort that all of us have to varying degrees.

Boyd (p 92) points out that if we use the term *addiction* to refer to any activity that people enjoy and to which they devote great amounts of time, then *“Being ‘addicted’ to information and to people is part of the human condition: it arises from a healthy desire to be aware of surroundings and to connect to society.”* It’s not the technology itself that draws young people in; it’s the chance to communicate with peers and learn about their world. The computer is just a tool, like the telephone used to be.

When adults see that children and teens are using computers and smart phones rather than playing outdoors or socializing in physical space, they find it easier to blame the computer and its supposed “addictive” qualities than to blame themselves and the social conditions that have deprived young people of the freedom to congregate in physical places, away from interfering adults.

### **Myth #3: Teens these days have no appreciation of privacy.**

Adults are often appalled by the tendency of teens to put information into the Internet that “should be private.” In contrast, teens regularly told boyd that they used social media in order to achieve privacy. The difference seems to be one of concern about privacy from whom. Parents worry about the prying eyes of strangers, whereas teens are more concerned about the prying eyes and ears of adults who know them well. In boyd’s words: *“When teens—and, for that matter, most adults—seek privacy, they do so in relation to those who hold power over them. Unlike privacy advocates and more politically conscious adults, teens aren’t typically concerned with governments and corporations. Instead, they’re trying to avoid surveillance from parents, teachers, and other immediate authority figures in their lives. They want the right to be ignored by the people they see as being ‘in their business.’ ...They wish to avoid paternalistic adults who use safety and protection as an excuse to monitor their everyday sociality.”*

Sometimes teens who are physically near one another will text or use social media rather than talk, precisely so parents or others who are physically present won’t know what they’re saying. Teens quite rightly get annoyed when their parents go online and read what was intended for peers, not parents. It’s little different, to them, from reading private mail, or bugging their bedroom, or reading their diary. Boyd (p 59) writes, further, *“In 2012, when I asked teens who were early adopters of Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram why they prefer these services to Facebook, I heard a near-uniform response: ‘Because my parents don’t know about it.’”*

It is true, however, that many teens ignore or are unaware of the long-lasting traces they may leave when they communicate through social media and the harmful effects that can occur, for example, if read by a potential future employer. Boyd found that despite the common perception that all teens are Internet savvy, many of them are not. They often don't know how to use the privacy settings on social media and are often unaware or forgetful of the extent to which audiences other than the intended ones could access what they are saying. Boyd suggests that we, as individual adults and as a society, could do more than we currently do to help teens understand better the social media they are using. Instead of warning them not to use it, or forbidding them from using it, we might help them find ways to use it more intelligently.

#### **Myth #4: Social media put teens at great risk from sexual predators.**

In a nationwide survey, boyd and her colleagues found that 93 percent of parents were concerned that their child might meet a stranger online who would hurt them, while only one percent of them indicated that any of their own children had ever had such an experience. By far the biggest fear expressed by parents was of “sexual predators,” “child molesters,” “pedophiles,” and “sex offenders” who might contact their child through their online participation. This mirrors the fears, revealed in other national and international surveys, that underlie many parents’ decisions to restrict their children from venturing away from home, outdoors, without adult protection. Surprisingly, the respondents to boyd’s survey expressed as much fear for their sons as for their daughters.

As I and others (e.g. Lenore Skenazy in her book *Free Range Kids*) have reported elsewhere, the “stranger danger” fears that afflict so many parents are greatly overblown. In fact, harm of any kind to children or teens from adult strangers is very rare, and there is little or no evidence that technology or social media has increased such danger. As boyd (p 110) puts it: “*Internet-initiated sexual assaults are rare—and the overall number of sex crimes against minors has been steadily declining since 1992—which suggests that the internet has not created a new plague.*” Of course, teens and children should all be cautioned about such possibilities, and we should discuss common-sense ways of preventing it with them, but the danger is so small that it is irrational to ban our children from social media because of it.

The fact is, child molestation is far more likely to be perpetrated by people who are well known to the child, such as relatives, trusted family friends, priests, and teachers, than by strangers. Again, in boyd’s (p 110) words: “*Although lawmakers are happy to propose interventions that limit youth’s rights to access online spaces, they have not proposed laws to outlaw children’s access to religious institutions, schools, or homes, even though these are statistically more common sites of victimization.*”

#### **Myth #5: Bullying through social media is a huge national problem.**

Bullying, real bullying, is, of course, a serious problem wherever it occurs; and, indeed, there are some well-documented cases of cyberbullying (online bullying) that have ended in tragedy. But how often do such cases occur? Is such bullying common enough and serious enough that

we should ban teens from social media?

As is the case for *addiction*, part of the problem with the term *bullying* lies in how people define or identify it. Boyd notes that she met parents who saw every act of teasing as bullying, even when their children, including those who were targets, did not. I have met such parents, too, and some are unshakeable in their convictions. Overextension also occurs when the term *bullying* is applied to serious, two-way disputes between people of equal power. Boyd found that teens themselves generally had a more conservative—and more meaningful—way of identifying bullying: Bullying exists when there is an imbalance of power between two individuals or groups and the more powerful one repeatedly attacks the less powerful one in ways that hurt the latter.

By this definition, according to boyd and the teens she interviewed, cyberbullying is much less common than parents believe it is. There is lots of teasing on line, lots of crude language, and lots of what teens call *drama* and *pranking*, but not a great deal of noxious bullying. Indeed, boyd (p 133) found that teens consistently reported greater distress from bullying at school, in person, than from bullying online.

Boyd spends a number of paragraphs helping us adults understand the rather common online phenomenon that teens, mostly girls, refer to as *drama*, which she defines as “*performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media.*” Drama, according to boyd, is a two-way activity with no clear power differential. It is also not necessarily hurtful. Indeed, many of the teens boyd interviewed seemed to enjoy taking part in drama; it was, among other things, a way of drawing attention to themselves and rallying the support of their friends. About 9 percent of the teens boyd interviewed even admitted that they would sometimes generate false drama by posting anonymous, mean comments about themselves and responding to those comments as if they had come from another person. Boys engage in similar activities, but are more likely to call it *pranking* (or, more coarsely, *punking*), a term that refers explicitly to the teasing nature of the activity. For many teens, it is a matter of pride to respond cleverly to such jabs without breaking down or losing their temper. This may, in part, be how young people develop a thick skin. Such exchanges have always been part of teenage experiences, more so among some groups than others, and their appearance online does not change their nature.

### **Concluding thoughts**

I like the main title of boyd’s book, *It’s Complicated*. I can well imagine these words prefacing many of the responses that teens gave to the questions she asked in interviews. An overriding message of the book is that the assumptions about teens and technology expressed by the media, politicians, parents, educators, and even by child psychiatrists and other such “experts” are often overly simplistic if not dead wrong. Whenever we see behavior among teens that seems strange to us, or hear of case examples of real atrocities, we tend to rush to judgment, and altogether too often the direction in which we rush is to add yet another restriction to the already highly restricted lives of today’s young people.

Aside from the very serious problems of poverty and inequality, our nation's biggest offense against teenagers, and against younger children, too, is lack of trust. Every time we snoop on them, every time we ban another activity "for their own good," every time we pass another law limiting their access to public places, we send the message, "we don't trust you."

Trust promotes trustworthiness, and lack of trust can promote the opposite. Teens are neither angels nor devils—they never were and never will be—any more than you and I are. Teens are not completely mature; they make mistakes. They may even be less mature and more prone to mistakes than you and I are. But they must be allowed to make mistakes, for that is how they grow up. They can't learn to take control of their own lives if we don't allow them to take that control. They can't learn to trust themselves if we don't allow them to practice such trust. Boyd's research and book are great achievements, because she took teens seriously and listened to them.

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What do you think? What have been your experiences and observations concerning teenagers, technology, and social media? Do you agree or disagree with the analyses presented here? This blog is a forum for discussion, and your stories, comments, and questions are valued and treated with respect by me and other readers. As always, I prefer if you post your thoughts and questions here rather than send them to me by private email. By putting them here, you share with other readers, not just with me. I read all comments and try to respond to all serious questions, if I feel I have something useful to say. Of course, if you have something to say that truly applies *only* to you and me, then send me an email.

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For more about young people's need for freedom, see [\*Free to Learn\*](#).

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## Reference

danah boyd. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Yale University Press, 2014.

1. What are your first reactions to this article? (3-4 sentences)
2. Write one of the author's claims.
3. Create your own claim about this content of this article.